

HEARTS & MASKS BY

HAROLD MACGRATH

AUTHOR OF "THE MAN ON THE BOX" AND "THE PUPPET CROWN"



We Watched the Girl as She Bathed and Bandaged the Wounded Arm.

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

The author, who has been "all through the Spanish war and the mix-up in China," and who has resigned his commission to accept the post of traveling salesman for a famous motor car company, being exceedingly tired one evening, chances to read a notice in the society column of an afternoon paper that the Blankshire Hunt Club is to hold a charity masquerade dance. Two packs of playing cards have been sent out as invitations. These cards are to be shown at the door, together with \$10. The scheme appeals to him, and he decides to attend. While at dinner in a downtown restaurant he sends out for a pack of cards and chooses at random the ten of hearts, the decidedly pretty girl dining opposite him, the companion of an elderly gentleman, becomes interested in his card shuffling, and a short, unconventional conversation results. After purchasing a domino after dinner our hero drops the ten of hearts, which seems to unduly interest another shopper in the little curio store. He takes the train for Blankshire, where he again meets the man whom he had started with the ten of hearts. His ten of hearts is accepted at the club, where he joins the revelers, one of whom, dressed as Caesar, he playfully hails with the question, "Shall I leave the idea of March?" He is somewhat startled when the pseudo Roman replies, "Nay, leave the ten of hearts." As a relief from the gloomy Caesar he meets a charming masked girl with whom he flirts violently until his pleasant evening is suddenly marred by overhearing a statement that the management has sent for the police and will make all guests identify their cards of invitation, as it has been discovered that a thief is among the guests and \$10,000 worth of jewelry stolen. The man and the girl escape to the cellar, where, after wandering about searching for a burglar to liberate, they are confronted by a burglar in the same predicament as themselves. In an effort to make their escape the man and the girl stumble against a door which opens into the ballroom. They are promptly seized as burglars and the accused being the person who had worn the makeup of Caesar, it develops after his escape from the room that the latter is the real burglar. Hearty weary after their adventures the capuchin, accompanied by the blue domino, repair to the denot, where they are at supper while waiting for the train back to the city.

CHAPTER VII—(Continued).

"And what might this mystery be?" she asked. "The whereabouts of the bogus Haggerty?"

"The bogus Haggerty will never cross our paths again. He has skipped by the light of the moon. No, that's not the mystery. Why did you tell me you were an impostor; why did you go to the cellars with me, when all the while you were at the ball on Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds' invitation?"

She leaned on her elbow and smiled at me humorously.

"Would you really like to know, Signor? Well, I was an impostor." She sat with her back to the fire, and a weird halo of light seemed to surround her and frame her. "Mrs. Hyphen-Bonds accidentally dropped that invitation in my studio, a few days before she sailed for Europe. I simply could not resist the temptation. That is all the mystery there is."

"And they still think you were there rightfully?"

"You are no longer mystified?"

"Yes, there is yet another mystery to solve: myself. I knew it. Without rhyme or reason I was in love; and without rhyme or reason, I was glad of it."

"Shall you ever be able to solve such a mystery?"—quizzically.

"It all depends upon you."

"Mr. Comestalk, you will not mar the exquisite humor of our adventure by causing me any annoyance. I am sure that some day we shall be very good friends. But one does not talk of love on eight hours' acquaintance. Be-

sides, you would be taking advantage of my helplessness; for I really depend upon you to see me safe back to New York. It is only the romance, the adventure, and such moonlight nights often superinduce sentimentality. What do you know of me? Nothing. What do I know of you? Nothing. Save that there is a kindred spirit which is always likely to lead us into trouble. Down in your heart you know you are only temporarily affected by moonshine. Come, make me a toast!"—lifting her cup.

"You are right," said I. "I am a gentleman. But it was only consistent that, having been the fool, I should now play the ass. Here's!"—and I held up my cup.

For the door opened quietly, and in walked the two men we had seen upon entering the Inn. One of them gently closed the door and locked it. One was in soiled everyday clothes, the other in immaculate evening dress. The latter doffed his opera hat with the most engaging smile imaginable. The girl and I looked up at him in blank bewilderment, and set our cups down so mechanically that the warm amber liquid splattered on the tablecloth.

Galloping Dick and the affable inspector of the cellars stood before us!

VIII.

"The unexpected always happens," began the pseudo-detective, closing his hat, drawing off his gloves, and stuffing them into a pocket. "As a friend of mine used to say, it is the unexpected that always surprises us. We never expected to see these charming masqueraders again, did we, William?"

"No, sir," said William, grinning affably. "We didn't. The gentleman was very nice and obliging to me, sir, when I was in the cellars."

"So I understand. Now," continued the late Mr. Haggerty, with the deadly affability of a Macaire, "I beg of you, Mr. Comestalk, I beg of you not to move or to become unduly excited. Physicians tell us that excitement wastes the red corpuscles, that is to say, the life of the blood."

"Your blood, sir, must be very thin," I returned coolly. But I cursed him soundly in my mind. William's bulging side-pocket convinced me that any undue excitement on my part would be exceedingly dangerous.

"William," said the chief rogue admiringly, "a gentleman always recognizes his opportunities, and never loses his sense of the balance of things."

"And he is usually witty, too, sir," William assented.

The girl sat pale and rigid in her chair.

"What do you want?" I demanded savagely.

"For one thing, I should like to question the propriety of a gentleman's sitting down to dine with a lady without having washed his face. The condiment does not add to your manly beauty. You haven't a cake of soap about you, William, have you?"

"No, sir," William's face expressed indescribable enjoyment of the scene. The girl's mouth stiffened. She was struggling to repress the almost irresistible smile that tickled her lips.

"In times like these," said I, determined not to be outdone, "we are often thoughtless in regard to our personal appearance. I apologize to the lady."

"Fine, fine! I sincerely admire you, Mr. Comestalk. You have the true spirit of adventure. Hasn't he, William?"

"He certainly has, sir."

"Comes to a private ball without an invitation, and has a merry time of it. Indeed, to have the perfect sense of humor that is what makes the world go round."

"Aren't you taking extra risk in offering me these pleasanties?" I asked. "Risks? In what manner?"

"The man you so cleverly impersonated is at the club. I do not know what prompted me to put him on his guard."

But neither of us drank; there wasn't time.

For the door opened quietly, and in walked the two men we had seen upon entering the Inn. One of them gently closed the door and locked it. One was in soiled everyday clothes, the other in immaculate evening dress. The latter doffed his opera hat with the most engaging smile imaginable. The girl and I looked up at him in blank bewilderment, and set our cups down so mechanically that the warm amber liquid splattered on the tablecloth.

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zerty a royal chase. It has been meat and drink to me to fool the cleverest policeman in New York. Till yesterday my face, as a criminal, was unknown to any man or woman, save William here, who was my valet in the old days. I have come to my clubs, dined, played billiards: a fine comedy, a fine comedy! Tomorrow William and I sail for Europe. Miss Hawthorne, you wear one of the most exquisite robes I have ever seen. Permit me to examine it."

The girl tore the ring from her finger and flung it on the table. I made a move as though to push back my chair.

"I wouldn't do it, sir," warned William quietly.

My muscles relaxed.

"Do not commit any rash action, Mr. Comestalk," said the girl, smiling bravely into my eyes. "This gentleman would not appreciate it."

The master rogue picked up the ring and rolled it lovingly about his palms.

"Beautiful, beautiful," he murmured. "Finest pigeon-blood, too. It is easily worth a thousand. Shall I give you my note of exchange for it?"—humorously.

The girl scorned to reply. He took out a little chamois bag and emptied its contents on the table. How they sparkled, scintillated, glowed: thousands in the whitest of stones! How he never had got his fingers on them! something I shall never learn. "Aren't they just beautiful?" he asked naively.

"Can you blame me for coveting them?" He set the ruby on top of the glittering heap. It lay there like a drop of blood. Presently he caught it up and presented it to the girl, who eyed him in astonishment. "I only wanted to look at it," he said coquettishly. "I like your art as much as I admire your beauty. Keep the ring."

She slipped it mechanically over her finger.

"But you, my dear Mr. Comestalk!" he cried, turning his shining eyes upon me, while his fingers deftly replaced the gems in the bag.

"I have no jewelry," I replied, tossing aside the cigarette.

"But you have something—infinitely better. I am rather observant. In regard to the whitest of stones! How he never had got his fingers on them! something I shall never learn. "Aren't they just beautiful?" he asked naively.

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lect that I possessed the sense of motion. The smoke of powder drifted across the flickering candles, and there was a salty taste on my tongue.

"Horrible!" cried the girl, covering her eyes.

The master rogue and his valet were led out into the assembly-room, and we reluctantly followed. I saw it all now. When Haggerty called up central at the club, he ascertained where the last call had come from, and learning that it came from Hollywood Inn, he took his chance. The room was soon filled with servants and stable hands, the pistol shot having lured them from their beds. The wounded man was very pale. He sat with his conjoined hand tightly clasped above the ragged wound, and a little pool of blood slowly formed at his side on the floor. But his eyes shone brightly.

"A basin of water and some linen!" cried the girl to Moriarty. "And send all these people away!"

"To ver rones, every one of ye!" snapped Moriarty, sweeping his hands.

"Tis no place for ye, be off!" He hurried the servants out of the room, and presently returned with a basin of water, some linen and balm.

We watched the girl as she bathed and bandaged the wounded arm, and once or twice the patient smiled. Haggerty looked on approvingly, and in William's eyes there beamed the gentle light of reverence. It was a picture to see this lovely creature playing the part of the good Samaritan, moving here and there in her exquisite gown. Ah, the tender mercy! I knew that, come what might, I had strangely found the right woman, the one woman.

"You're a good little woman," said the rogue, his face softening; "and a good woman is the finest thing God ever placed upon earth. Had I only found one!" He turned whimsically toward me. "Are you engaged to marry this little woman?"

"No."

"Surely you love her?"

"Surely I do!" I looked bravely at the girl as she spoke.

But she never gave any sign that she heard. She planned the ends of the bandages carefully.

"And what brought you to this?" asked Haggerty, looking down at his prisoner.

The prisoner shrugged.

"You're the making of a fine man in you," went on Haggerty generously. "What caused you to slip up?"

"Name, William, isn't he? Most men would have flung the wallet at my head."

"Oh, he is same, sir; never you doubt it, sir," said the amiable William.

"I have some silver in change," I suggested with some bitterness.

"Far be it that I should touch silver," he said generously, "did this rogue. Besides, you will need something to pay for this little supper and the fare back to New York. My bills disappeared into his pocket. You will observe that I trust you implicitly. I haven't even counted the money."

William sniggered.

"And is there anything further?" I inquired. The comedy was beginning to weary me. It was so one-sided.

"I am in no particular hurry," the rogue answered, his sardonic smile returning. "It is so long since I have chatted with people of my kind."

I scowled.

"Pardon me, I meant from a social point of view only. I admit we would not be equals in the eye of the Pres-bu-ry."

And then followed a scene that reminds me to this day of some broken, fantastic dream, a fragment from some bewildering nightmare.

IX.

For suddenly I saw his eyes widen and flash with anger and apprehension. Quick as a passing sun-shadow, his hand swept the candelabrum from the table. He made a swift backward spring toward the door, but he was a little too late. The darkness he had created was not intense enough, for there was still the ruddy glow from the logs; and the bosom of his dress-shirt made a fine target. Besides, the eyes that had peered into the window were accustomed to the night.

Blind! The glass of the window shattered and jingled to the floor, and a sharp report followed. The rogue cried out fierce anguish, and reeled against the wall. William whipped out his revolver, but, even from his favorable angle, he was not quick enough. The hand that had directed the first bullet was ready to direct the second.

All this took place within the count of ten. The girl and I sat stiffly in our chairs, as if petrified, it was all so swiftly accomplished.

"Drop it!" said a cold, authoritative voice, and I saw the vague outlines of Haggerty's face beyond the broken window pane.

William knew better than to hesitate. His revolver struck the floor dully, and a curse rolled from his lips. Immediately a heavy body precipitated itself against the door, which crashed inward, and an officer fearlessly entered, a revolver in each hand. The tableau, which lasted fully a minute, was finally disturbed by the entrance of Haggerty himself.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss," he said heartily; "it's all over. I'm sorry for the bullet, but it had to be done. The rascal has nothing more serious than a splintered bone. I am a dead shot. A fine night!"—triumphantly. "It's been a long chase, and I never was sure of the finish. You're the cleverest rogue I has been my good fortune to meet this many a day. I don't even know who you are yet. Well, well! We'll round that up in time."

Not till the candles again sputtered with light, and William was securely handcuffed and disarmed, did I recol-

"That subject is taboo," replied the thief. "But I want to beg your pardon for underestimating your cunning."

"It was all due to a chance shot at the telephone."

"I kept you guessing?"

"Merrily, too. My admiration is wholly yours, sir," returned Haggerty, picking up the telephone exchange book. He rang and placed his lips to the transmitter, calling a number.

"Hello! Is this the chief of the Blankshire police? Yes? Well, this is Haggerty. That idea I hinted to you was a mighty good one. Prepare two strong cells and have a doctor on hand. What? Oh, you will find your horse and carriage at Moriarty's. Good-by!"

My money was handed over to me. I returned it to my wallet, but without any particular enthusiasm.

"It's a bad business, William," said I.

"It's all in the game, sir,"—with a look at